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ABSTRACT

Perestroika and glasnost are not only influencing the economic and social structure of Soviet society, but also have led to a revision of the authorized history of the USSR as Soviet historians struggle to create a national history based on fact instead of dogma. The Soviet history profession itself is also undergoing a major self-examination, as reformist elements battle Stalinist elements. Premier Gorbachev has called for new, more honest studies of the Soviet national past, especially of the several "blank spots" that exist in Stalinist history. Textbooks are the principal means for perpetuating an approved history. In the USSR, school history textbooks are written to conform to the history syllabus designed by the State Committee for Public Education. Gorbachev and his fellow reformers need a new national history, but not one that criticizes the role of the Party or undermines their own authority. It remains to be seen if the critical ferment within the history profession can be controlled by the State, and what new version of Soviet history will be produced. (PPB)

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# "National History in the USSR: In Search of a Usable Past"

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# National History in the USSR:

# In Search of a Usable Past*

Howard D. Mehlinger

This paper provides a brief overview of a complex, volatile topic: national history in the USSR. The paper begins with commentary about the problem of defining "national history" in the Soviet Union, moves to a description of the political forces that are influencing the study of Soviet history, summarizes the impact these changes are having on the teaching of history in the schools, and closes with some speculations about the future.

The paper's sub-title -- "In Search of a Usable Past" -- draws attention to the role national history plays in every nation but especially so in the USSR today. Among other functions it performs, national history informs citizens about who they are and how they came to be -- or at least what they want to believe about themselves. Soviet history is in ferment today precisely because top political leaders and enlightened members of society are seeking a new identity. This necessarily requires a somewhat different version of the past -- a history that is more useful for present purposes than the old one.

## National History: Problems of Definition

In one sense the national history of the USSR is merely the history of Russia and the Russian Empire. While a seemingly simple and safe observation, it is fraught with controversy. For example, how does one distinguish the history of Russia from that of the Russian Empire? The history of England can be easily distinguished from the history of the British Empire and the history of Germany can be separated from the study of the German Empire, but the history of Russia and the history of the Russian Empire seem to be one story. Perhaps it was because the Russian Empire grew more slowly; perhaps it was because the territory acquired was largely contiguous and thinly populated; perhaps it was because the Russian government was able largely to avoid confrontations with other imperial powers as it extended its frontiers; perhaps it was Russification -- a policy of absorbing new territories and people into the social/cultural structure, however unsuccessful that policy ultimately proved to be. Maybe it was all or none of these factors, but somehow the Russian nation and the Russian Empire became one and the same in the eyes of many.

The October 1917 Socialist Revolution poses another prickly problem for Soviet historians. On the one hand, the October 1917 Socialist Revolution marks not only a new stage in Russian history but also in the history of mankind. Discontinuity seems at least as important as continuity in the

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minds of Soviet historians. From one point of view 1918 was Year 1 in an entirely new nation. Ideologically, Marxism-Leninism was built on Western European philosophies, perspectives largely foreign to Russia. Leninism repudiated the Russian Orthodox Church, tsarism, imperialism, and Slavophilism -- the glue that held the Russian Empire together. In Bolshevik minds, Moscow would become the center of a world revolution that would ultimately undermine old-fashioned entities such as nation and empire. Yet, when it became apparent that the world was not going to follow Bolshevik designs and the USSR must find a way to protect itself, Stalin changed direction and promoted "socialism in one country." Soon, world revolution and international communism became mainly tools for Russian nationalism.

Then, there is the nationality question. The Soviet Union is comprised of approximately 100 nationalities, each more or less preserving some measure of national identification. Before 1917, there was little debate about the treatment to be accorded various nationalities: Russia ruled. Soviet leaders took a different approach. At least cultural autonomy was respected, if political autonomy was not. For example, school textbooks are published in more than 50 languages as a way of showing respect for separate nationalities. Yet, national history in the USSR does not mean the history of various nationalities; it after all is the history of Russia, the Russian Empire, and the USSR.

The collectivization of agriculture in the 1930's and World War II profoundly undermined whatever independence the various nationalities enjoyed. Forced collectivization and the purge trials led to deportation of peoples from their homelands to Siberia; the absorption of the Baltic States, Western Ukraine, and Eastern Byelorussia in 1939 led to Russian control of these regions and deportations to Central Asia of those who resisted; and Nazi collaboration by some Kalmyks and Tatars shortly after the invasion of the USSR in June 1941, led Stalin to crack down hard on these nationalities and to disperse them to other regions of the country. While the conditions for nationalities have certainly improved since Stalin's death, the USSR seems no closer to solving the nationality question. Under Gorbachev nationality groups have felt somewhat greater freedom to express their bitterness -- most vividly and recently in the Baltic states, in Armenia, and by the Crimean Tatars -- but the Soviet regime seems no closer to finding ways to harmonize a national identity with a nationality identity. Although some republics -- e.g., Estonia -- offer separate courses on the history of their republics as part of the school curriculum, all students throughout the USSR study identical courses in world history and national history of the USSR, albeit in different languages.

Thus, Soviet historians must write a "national history" that includes the story of a discredited empire ruling over many nationalities while largely ignoring the history of the separate nationalities; and they must find elements in the discredited pre-revolutionary past to show reasonable continuity to the present. These have not been easy problems to resolve.

Glasnost, Perestroika and the Re-Writing of National History

Most Americans who follow world events recognize the Russian words "perestroika" and "glasnost." They may be suspicious of how the words are used, but they know that they stand for changes occurring in Soviet society, mainly in order to make the USSR more competitive economically with other nations. Thus, "perestroika" stands for a "restructuring" of the economic system and to a limited extent the political system. "Glasnost" (or openness) implies that Soviet society can change only if there are more opportunities for citizens to communicate freely, to criticize existing policies and current policy makers, and to propose alternatives. The policy of "glasnost" presumably buys the regime support of intellectuals, a support that may be required if perestroika is to succeed.

Perestroika and glasnost are also having an impact on Soviet historians and may affect national history in the USSR.* The status of Soviet historians differs somewhat from that of American historians. In one sense Soviet historians are very important because they tell the official story of how things came to be. In a sense, every Soviet history is an authorized one because those historians who have deviated from the official line are not published or have been punished in one or more ways such as being denied access to important archives. History has been used to document the correctness or error in previous policies, often by referring to Lenin and by linking his words from the past to somewhat analogous current situations. At the same time, Soviet historians have lacked credibility among Soviet intellectuals. Whatever technical or professional skills they might possess, Soviet historians have often found refuge in tedious arguments about relatively non-controversial issues, while avoiding altogether key topics in the recent past. (Some Soviet historians have avoided modern history, altogether, finding it safer to work on topics from early Russian history.)

The recent urge to re-examine history did not begin within the history profession but within literature and the arts. Novels, poems, plays, and film -- some written decades before and suppressed until now -- examine topics, events, and people from the Soviet past that Soviet historians have largely ignored or treated dishonestly. Children of the Arbat, a semi-autobiographical work by Anataoli Rybakov, presents a cross-section of life in the 1930's. Appearing 20 years after it was scheduled for publication in 1967, it provides a frank description of Stalin's cruelty, his manupulation of the Communist Party, and the corrosive effects of his leadership on Soviet

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*It is impossible to do justice to the discussions occurring in the Soviet Union surrounding the revision of Soviet history. Soviet and American journals frequently publish descriptions and analyses of the current debate. A recent summary and interpretation of the debate is by Mark von Hagen, entitled "History and Politics under Gorbachev: Professional Autonomy and Democratization." It appears in The Harriman Institute Forum, Vol. 1, Number 11 (November, 1988) pp. 1-8. This issue of the Forum can be purchased for $2.00 and ordered from the W. Averell Harriman Institute for Advanced Study of the Soviet Union, Columbia University, 420 West 118th Street, 12th Floor, New York, N.Y. 10027.

society. Other artistic treatments of the Stalinist past are Yuri Trifanov's novel The Disappearance about daily life during the purges; Tengiz Abuladze's film Repentance, a surrealistic look at life in a terror-ridden society; Vladimir Dudintsev's novel White Robes about the abuse of Soviet science under the influence of Trofim Lysenko; and Anna Akhmatova's anti-Stalinist poem "Requiem," written from 1935-1940 and only published in 1987. Several plays by Mikhail Shatrov (including Forward, Forward, Forward!, The Brest Peace, and Dictatorship of Conscience) offer Soviet audiences realistic portrayals of early Bolshevik leaders, such as Bukharin and Trotsky, individuals who have been denied a place in the official history of the USSR. The enthusiastic reception these and other works have received reveal the interest Soviet citizens have in their past and their desire for it to be treated candidly.

Popular interest in history has been matched by official calls for a new history. On November 2, 1987, speaking at the joint session of the CPSU Central Committee, the USSR Supreme Soviet, and the RSFSR Supreme Soviet and marking the 70th Anniversary of the October Revolution, Mikhail Gorbachev devoted nearly half of his address to the history of the USSR, in particular the period of Stalin's rule. Perhaps, the most important result of the address was to legitimize the study of certain "blank spots" in Soviet history -- e.g., the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact, the period of agricultural collectivization, and the purge trials. The most disappointing part of the speech to Western historians and some Soviet historians was that Gorbachev gave no indication that he favored full and unfettered inquiries into such topics or that there was now less need for official or consensus histories.

Meanwhile, the history profession has been undergoing a major self-examination. Perhaps, the most visible and leading reform advocate is Iuri Afanasiev, rector of the Moscow State Historical Archives Institute and formerly a member of the Institute of World History. In September, 1985, he published a piece entitled "The Past and Ourselves" in Kommunist, the theoretical journal of the Communist Party; it was intended to set a direction for the way history might be approached under Gorbachev. Essentially his argument was that history as it had been written in the past performed a disservice to society because it promoted passive attitudes among citizens and dogmatic responses to present circumstances.

The article triggered a strong public response and opposition among Stalinist historians. As a consequence, he was dropped from the Institute of World History. However, this did not muzzle him. On January 11, 1987 Moscow News published excerpts from his inaugural address to members of the Archives Institute. He compared work performed by Soviet historians to those published in the West and found them wanting, blaming the situation upon cowardly behavior by academic bureaucrats.

Afanasiev is a convenient symbol for the historical debate underway in the USSR. To a degree his criticism is encouraged by the current political regime because he is willing to attack those in entrenched positions who want to defend past practices and are more interested in their careers than in sound history. He is also eager to promote new, more honest studies of historical periods and topics that have been "blank spots" to the present

time. Gorbachev needs a re-examination of historical themes -- especially NEP policies and the collectivization of agriculture -- if he is to gain public support for policies that run counter to Stalin practices, and Gorbachev seems to recognize the vital role that a sound history can play in overcoming apathy and re-kindling pride in the nation. At the same time, it is not clear that a revolution in the study of history can be controlled in ways Gorbachev might prefer. Gorbachev, dissatisfied with the current official version of the history of the USSR, has called for a new commission to write a new history. Afanasiev and others have asked why an "official" version is necessary or desirable. They propose that multiple histories be written and subjected to scholarly debate. While Gorbachev has been willing to restore Bukharin, Zinoviev, Kamenev, and Rykhov to their prominent positions in Soviet history, he has no such interest in Trotsky.

Meanwhile, Soviet historians are expressing greater interest in research on the Soviet Union by Western historians. Books on Soviet history by American historians -- e.g., Stephen Cohen's book on Bukharin and Alex Rabinowitch's book on the 1917 Russian Revolution -- are being translated into Russian and published in the USSR. American historians are being invited to conferences in Moscow to examine topics from the 1930's.

Soviet School Textbooks and National History

In every nation elementary and secondary schools offer courses in history. The most common courses are devoted to the history of the nation state. The main reason such courses are offered is to socialize youth into the common culture shared by the people in a nation. In some cases the culture is not shared; then a dominant group may seek to impose its culture onto the others who live in the nation.

Textbooks are the principal means for assuring that an approved version of history is taught to children and youth. While teachers' skills, knowledge, and political values can vary enormously within a school, state, and nation, the same school textbook can be used in a variety of circumstances. Those in authority can examine a textbook closely and decide if it contains what should be taught.

The process of deciding what information to include in a textbook varies somewhat from nation to nation. Rarely, if ever, is scholarship alone the overriding factor. For example, in the United States, the content of textbooks is determined mainly by editors of independent publishing firms based upon their understanding of what schools wish to teach. Textbooks are often approved by state or local adoption committees comprised of teachers and lay members of the community. Together, they decide if the textbook contains the information, perspectives, and interpretations they want their children to possess following instruction. Because there are many independent producers publishing textbooks, American teachers have many books from which to choose. But, because each firm is responding to the same market forces, the textbooks are remarkably the same. Textbooks vary over time, but they tend to vary together in the same direction.

Soviet teachers are not given choices among textbooks. There is only one textbook for each course, albeit it may appear in as many as 53 different languages. School history textbooks are written to fit the history syllabus designed by the State Committee for Public Education.

In general, Soviet history textbooks adhere more closely to Soviet scholarship than American textbooks do to American scholarship. A considerable lag can exist in the United States regarding what scholars judge to be "cutting-edge" scholarship and what the public knows and is willing to accept. The public helps decide what knowledge American textbooks will contain. In the USSR, until now, there has been little encouragement for Soviet historians to stray from interpretations promoted officially. Thus, secondary school and elementary school textbooks are expected to be structured so as to make the same points promoted by college textbooks and research scholars.

Therefore, it is not surprising that the ongoing debate among Soviet historians is having a major impact upon history teaching in Soviet schools. The ninth and tenth grade textbooks on the History of the USSR and World History were withdrawn during the 1987-88 school year. Teachers were told that new textbooks were being developed and would be available soon. (At the time this is being written, they had not yet appeared.) Teachers were told to use whatever means they could find; special workshops were organized for teachers in Moscow to help teachers generate materials for their classes. The ninth and tenth grade books in both courses cover largely the period from the October, 1917 Revolution to the present, the period most under scrutiny.

In May, 1988 the State Committee for Public Education canceled history exams for the year. In announcing the decision Izvestia said it was the only honorable thing to do because the existing textbooks provided a highly distorted history of the USSR. Afanasiev charged that the Soviet ninth grade history book on the History of the USSR was the worst history book that ever existed; he said, "There was not one truthful page in the whole book."

The Soviet Academy of Pedagogical Sciences has also come under harsh criticism for the manner in which history is presented in schools. Instruction is described as dull, depending almost exclusively upon lecture and recitation. American textbooks and American pedagogical approaches have been cited as examples to emulate. An American reporter who visited a Soviet high school in Moscow in October, 1988 described classroom practices wholly different from those observers have experienced in the past. Students were encouraged to offer their own opinions about Stalin and about the performance of the Soviet economy. Soviet teachers claimed that for the first time they were able to share personal experiences from the Stalin period, experiences that differed greatly from the ways society is pictured in Soviet textbooks. And teachers were using newspapers, magazines, and current journals in place of the previous textbooks.

Conclusions and Speculations

The Soviet Union is engaged in a grand, top-down, social experiment. The focus of this experiment is the Soviet economic system, but economic problems are so embedded and the remedies so radical that hardly any segment of the society can remain aloof from the reform.

Gorbachev's dilemma is that he must force change from the top without employing methods that Stalin used to create the current system. Gorbachev must convince people by argument and incentive that his scheme will work and will improve living conditions for Soviet citizens while strengthening the status of the Soviet economy relative to other nations. He can be successful only if he can persuade those currently in authority to change their attitudes or if he can replace them. The fact that many of those in authority profit personally from existing arrangements inhibits their desire to change or to stand aside for others.

Encouraging open criticism is one way Gorbachev can bring heat on officials. While he can try to embarrass those who resist him, there is danger in such an approach. Some may give lip service to change without really doing so; those under attack can join together to block his reform efforts and discredit his leadership.

Gorbachev needs a new national history, one that is critical of the past 70 years but not so critical as to undermine the foundations of Communist Party power and discredit his own authority. It is necessary to demonstrate that values promoted under Stalin were frequently false values. Thus, criticism should now be encouraged, not discouraged; competition is good not capitalistic; differentiation in pay is desirable and does not reward selfishness. But there are surely limits to the amount of re-direction a society can stand before it flies apart. Once criticism is allowed can it be channelled?

The history profession is in ferment. Those who have dominated the profession are experiencing severe criticism. Those who would write the new, more honest history feel constraints: Many archives remain closed; some topics remain taboo. Yet, the opportunity for Soviet historians to provide intellectual leadership is greater today than at any other time since the 1920's. Until now at least Gorbachev's needs seem closely aligned to that of the progressive historians. A more honest national history seems clearly possible. Indeed, it will be increasingly more difficult to sustain a false history. Preserving "blank spots" and withholding historical facts requires a capacity to deprive people of access to information. Gorbachev cannot have it both ways: Promoting glasnost so as to make the Soviet society more competitive while denying Soviet citizens access to disagreeable information. That glasnost and perestroika will continue to have an impact on national history in the USSR seems obvious; it will be interesting to follow the degree and direction of that impact in the months and years ahead.